

Public Intellectuals

In the past decade some intellectuals have criticized the academicization of intellectual life, seeing the move into the universities as a loss of critical engagement and frank address to a larger public sphere as well as a self-limiting professionalization. Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals*, celebrating an earlier generation of New York City writers, raised this criticism and regretted the abstraction of critical discourse. I'm willing to grant that some of this may be true, but the critics often fail to see two significant changes. First, some intellectuals have chosen to work in visual culture rather than print culture forms. This is a change that has gone unnoticed by traditional print culture intellectuals who don't seem to realize that in order to address a large public audience in the age of television and intermedia, a public intellectual might choose to work in video or computer media. Second, these critics often reveal a nostalgia for the social scenes of a past print culture, especially a boy's club of bars and brawls--literal or verbal. But that feminists in particular and politically motivated gender and racial minorities might choose a different style, site, and mode of discourse and for that matter, have a somewhat different, broader, idea of the audience they want to address is often lost to these literary critics.

The public intellectuals I want to discuss here have chosen to work in moving image/sound forms and to make work which presents ideas, which in one way or another argues for a position on an issue. I don't have a definitive term to describe this work. Some times I refer to it as expository bedside like expository writing, it operates to put forth an idea or set of ideas. It often uses the common rhetorical strategies of expository writing as well: comparison and contrast, definition and examples, personal experience, etc. But it can also freely use dramatic narration or interior monologue, fantasy and parody.

While sharing many concerns with traditional social documentary, it often differs significantly in three ways. First, it is skeptical of documentary realism in both technique and epistemology. This position in feminist media analysis goes back to Eileen McGarry's 1975 essay in *Women & Film*, "Documentary, Realism, and Women's Cinema." Second, it is often ironic and skeptical of finding or presenting a singular statement of the "truth" of a situation. And Third, it is often personal, based in performance of the maker or her obvious narrative presence. This raises questions about women's voice (speech) and not just her visual presence.

Another term we might use is essayistic, stressing the first person narration of the literary essay form. But it is not exclusively so and often in *Public Intellectuals* In the past decade some intellectuals have criticized the academicization of intellectual life, seeing the move into the universities as a loss of critical engagement and frank address to a larger public sphere as well as a

self-limiting to make its point.

And it does make its point. The body of work I'm discussing is fundamentally didactic. It has something to say and tries to say it. It teaches, it edifies, it analyzes and clarifies, although it often used comedy and parody and the relating of a personal story to do so. This body of work is not so much a genre as a grouping which displays a set of overlapping concerns. If we must find a label for it, I would settle for "political postmodernism."

I also want to make it clear that I think this body of work is the most interesting today in developing video art. But I also think that some critical questions need to be raised about it, based both in more theoretical questions about the nature of independent video and strategies for political challenge and change. I think these questions can be coalesced around three major concerns. One: we need to actually understand and judge the quality and the consistency of the analysis the work is putting forward. In other words, these tapes make political arguments--they need to be judged not only aesthetically, but also politically. Two: Because much of this work involves the presence and performance of the maker within the work--and comes out of performance art in the 70s and 80s, the effectiveness of the performance is a major consideration in the effectiveness of the work. Three. The ability of the work to present contradictions and examine a density of investigative strategies to deal with multiple layers of meaning is vital to its success.

Video has been a medium open to and available for people who want to challenge their marginalization by the mainstream.

In video, sound and particularly voice, has a dominance which can be seen as an integral part of its evolution from commercial television and television's evolution from radio, and which can be interpreted as a feature of synch sound being present at the origins of the medium (unlike film, which has to wait for about 30 years to have synch sound).

Video then gives women and other groups contesting for power not only a presence as represented visually, but also a voice and it is that voice that becomes the key vehicle in many cases for contesting power.

In a special way, video is the medium that can and often does fulfill the 60's New Left slogan of "Speak the truth to power" that is to challenge the existing structure and arrangement of power as diffused throughout a system, the imperative to present an outspoken alternative remains.

But related to this--and I want to be clear I am trying to describe a problem area for artists, not validate a slur--related to this is an aspect of the bias in our

culture. That bias is this: it is often through an interpretation of voice (both words and also extra-verbal signifiers such as intonation and pitch). Because of this cultural bias to dismiss women, to claim that she's "hysterical" and therefore the substance of what is said should not be taken seriously, the matter of voice and embodying it or disembodying it becomes a major concern for women media artists, especially when trying to express ideas using forms other than traditional dramatic narration.

One of the basic problems with this kind of video work revolves around the problem of just how much one can convey using a moving image and sound medium, since unlike the written word, typically the receiver does not have the opportunity. While some rewinding is possible, typically such works are not open to it, and works based on ideas of hypertext or designed to be open to quick access such as CD-ROM media do not apply to linear program video.

A classic case in point is provided by Martha Rosler's *A Simple Case for Torture*, an hour long video which deconstructs an opinion piece that appeared in *Newsweek*. Written by a conservative philosopher, the essay justifies police torturing "terrorists" for the greater good of saving lives. Rosler proceeds to relentlessly tear the argument apart, especially in revealing how U.S. officially sponsored brutality is used in Latin America against democratic change. Piling on more and more evidence with quotes from and headlines from the *New York Times* and other sources while maintaining her refutation with the determination of an attack dog, Rosler makes her case.

critic Karen Henry in reviewing Rosler's tape claims:

It's like an explosion of outrage shattering the complex pieces of the social network of smug North American assumptions about good and bad. Unfortunately, the weight of the material becomes ponderous. The tape is not easy to watch. The array of information is difficult to assimilate in a visual medium. ...The work is primarily a verbal diatribe, the visuals representing the quantity of material available to anyone who would look for it, like a stint of library research. The issues are extremely important, but the argument is too complex and intellectual for the video medium which requires simpler, more powerful images.

The difference between print culture and visual culture:

Print--the printed word dominates. In visual forms, the voice (speaking words), discussion, debate dominates. Visual culture--the body dominates, the presentation of visual material is most intriguing, the voice is important for its

Feuer:

In the case of *Dynasty*, however, the parodic attitude is found in the mass culture; it does not require an avant garde sensibility to make a postmodern parody of *Dynasty*. ...The double-edged attitudes toward *Dynasty* cited here make avant-garde activations of the text almost superfluous, as in the example of Joan Braderman's *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986), a clever work of video art that reproduces what the mass audience already "did" with *Dynasty*. Braderman quite literally inserts her body into scenes from the program, all the while delivering a running ironic commentary expressing her ambivalence toward *Dynasty*. Her camp activation is certainly postmodern, but no more so than wearing a blue T-shirt with "*Dynasty* addict" spelled out in rhinestones. (p. 456)